

Asemic Writing: Definitions & Contexts: 1998 - 2016

compiled by jim leftwich

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1998

Jim Leftwich, Jan 27, 1998 (from a letter to Tim Gaze):

A seme is a unit of meaning, or the smallest unit of meaning (also known as a sememe, analogous with phoneme). An asemic text, then, might be involved with units of language for reasons other than that of producing meaning. As such, the asemic text would seem to be an ideal, an impossibility, but possibly worth pursuing for just that reason.

Jim Leftwich, 1998 (from a letter to Tim Gaze)

Inviting people to read the unreadable - this is absolutely a part of what we're doing. And, this is what keeps the work from being "mere decoration." I seem to need to do things like the spirit writing and the word sculptures in excess, as if I don't really have an idea of what I'm doing until I've done a hundred or so of them. (This is a slight exaggeration, but not much.)

I'm trying to let go, to get beyond or below stuff like self or ego and expressivity and emotion and cerebration. I'm trying to open up to the possibilities of the materials, to the process of working with the materials. I do think we come up against a barrier in language, that there are areas of experience that language doesn't reach. That's one of the reasons for foregrounding the letter, for making the letter the unit of composition, for dismantling the word. I think the violence is directed, first of all, towards the conventions of language, towards grammar and syntax, towards the sentence and the phrase, then it comes to the word itself. This is where things get really interesting for me.

Jim Leftwich, 1998 (from a letter to Tim Gaze)

i have been attempting to read some of my asemic works aloud. it's surprising what occurs. a sort of mutated letteral growl and hiss, recognizable letter sounds which segue in and out of asemic vocalizations. i have no interest at all in performance, but i may get around to making a tape at some point. but i need a little more practice before i'll be willing to do that. it's interesting, though, that i'm finding the asemic texts to be something other than silence. they lack signification, which is probably their strongest allure, but i think they are not lacking in sound.

Jim Leftwich, 1998 (from a letter to Tim Gaze)

what i want is the destabilized letter, the fundamentals of language
corroded and deteriorated.

http://www.muse-apprentice-guild.com/mag_special_edition/jim_leftwich/asemic-writing.html

1999

Tim Gaze, introduction to THE OXYGEN OF TRUTH

THIS IS A COLLECTION of improvised asemic texts. The word “asemic” means “having no semantic content.” These pieces contain handwriting gestures, letters and symbols, characters from other writing systems such as Chinese, Arabic and Korean, fragments of letters, and new symbols of my own devising. Thus, they incorporate writing, but at an infra-verbal level.

I produce these works while physically excited but mentally still. Usually late at night, when stoned and drunk, with intense music such as drum’n'bass or dub reggae playing, in a “no mind” state. That is to say, the part of my mind that composes ideas into words and sentences is not operating. Rather, I make a mark, pause and look, make another mark and so on, until the page feels complete. There is an element of dance in my movement. An intuitive, rather than logical, process. Quite similar to Zen art.

The American poet Jim Leftwich taught me the word “asemic.” His asemic work is one source of inspiration. Two Belgian poets, Henri Michaux and Christian Dotremont, produced a lot of work on this interstice between writing and visual art. The Australian poet Cornelis Vleeskens independently arrived at a related style, although he doesn’t refer to his work as “asemic.” All of these inform my work. Note that all of these people are or were practising verbal poets.

Conversely, I don’t regard the work of the abstract expressionists as asemic. Their compositions tend to use free gestures rather than writing-like gestures.

Crazy Running Style Chinese calligraphy, avant-garde Japanese calligraphy such as was practised by the Gutai and Bokujin-kai groups, certain tendencies in contemporary visual poetry, and illegible graffiti lettering are all part of what I see as an asemic stream. In May 1999, I began publishing a little magazine titled asemic, to weave the threads of this tradition into something more coherent.

Chinese ink landscapes are said to be written. Hand-drawn Javanese batik designs are also said to be written. In Asian cultures, calligraphy, painting and poetry are intertwined. I perceive the asemic tradition as a Western attempt to generate a similar fusion of these separate streams of culture.

Asemic texts have no writer-intended meaning. If you the viewer perceive a meaning, you've created that meaning yourself. This is a mystery.

Many of my emotional states are unspeakable in words. Only through asemic writing can I express what's inside me.

As a writer of prose and poetry in several styles, I feel as if I've arrived at the event horizon between writing and not-writing, a point on the edge of chaos. The air is sweet here. Only words lie; asemic texts cannot lie. Here is the oxygen of truth.

TIM GAZE

Adelaide, Australia

November 1999

2000

Jim Leftwich

afterword to The Oxygen of Truth, by Tim Gaze

Broken Boulder Press, 2000

A SYMPOSIUM EMERGING FROM TIM GAZE

Organized by Jim Leftwich for the Institute For Study and Application, at Kohoutenberg

A NON-PATRIARCHAL GAZE

Anmassend Bekehrt

Word to ambient amenities of alar noise fictional through subjectivity in ambiguity, blatant combination, cognition retreats to a hadal beginning of nothingness. Silence is engagement of the choral stratosphere, filial vindictive in cessation, Ein Sof. A stroke of subjectivity switches the provocative to its thirst, a pledge of excessive interference, rasp garish and whimsical

autonomous abalone. The cross is a prosthetic happiness. It dawns on us as consciousness of a mandatory salvage. The ages relinquish to an appeal of sound.

TIME OUT FOR TIM (A GAZE ON GAZE)

Lupi d'Cort

But lisible repository of prostrate ribbons, as though blurred in a contextual suborn of doubt, the actually partitioned is a difference of refraction.

Action is a reference to terrestrially apportioned doubt.

The poet wagers his excess in a poetry of knowledgeable expressivity.

The location of the tome is a node of the threaded love.

Anoint to winter authority, the hour of isthmus antimony, refracted through radial birds to the heart of lather.

I live in the solitude of these symbolic emblems

A NOTE ON TIM GAZE

Batente Queceux

Satyrs, silken pike, telluric satyrs splayed to the abject lyre, I have seen the plicate spume of their ordinance crone. Hat rat croon sallies postmortem spiel, bridge of slattern cirrus, sly bipedal ossifies afflicted form slurs a history of eloped thesis. Factual onwards from Hispanic Cyclops, their spittle slaughter against rapture of the real, these potential tickle neologisms moronic in verbal gestation die born in violent rites of written nationalities. Silence advances from a frolic of ice. The last thing in the world is the age of its words.

READING TIM GAZE

Retorico Unentesi

Vagrant is my theurgy! Bitten and bottled in sound, thetic acne, a tone of demented curses lulls the oneiric to a cow thorn of Texas, cast cactus innocuous of titles, deacon spleen besmirched by perks of masturbation. Sex is a sheaf of lawless forgetfulness. I've had my lexicon beaten to

a wager of signal banality. The reaction of integrity is to raze the form of the viaduct. A contest of tumors grazes the spoken sport. I've seen a rain of talus around the peacock love, and I still foam from a form of excess!

A NOTE ON TIM GAZE

Feito Zahlt

Implosions of subjectivity corrode the singularity. Silence is an outré murmur. Ambiguity is a recombinative and thorny praxis. Night renews the word, musical history of the outlaw, keeps the written to an excess of muscular attention. The cyclical is a clone of love. The poet lives in his native pronoun against the electric rapture of a tumultuous and fictional will. The roses are singing a topsoil of vowels, inertia aghast at the heresy of belief. Praise the play of form. Interns in a stasis addled by overdetermination bleed a Kaddish of pagan derision against the inquisition of parenthetical swords. Comets in the captivity of imperial love, sial steeples of the self, baked forage and fictional ambage, felt innocuous of beatific laughter, all that felt implies in a multiplicity of poultry. I for one in arrears as isthmus poetry, delirium of the discursive ingrate, echo against a poetry of experiential fiction. Time is a visible table of ungulate urges. His slate is a requisite anthropic glaciation.

A NOTE ON TIM GAZE

Ricev Prosa

Hermetic mussels, cherished and disowned by a froth of meaning, stealthily ampersand, pity the blight of augury amusing the predilections of blurred light. Paeans to wine, to ingots notably wiggle, piously gorged on heavy coffee and plaid with corrals of implausible fixity, the traction of the fox bleeds a wrought milk sural and randy corruption scions to biblical seizure. The bookshelf is as beatific as its authorial impound. Simply an ocean of joints to imply the perinatal shingle, brume thetic pencil stamen, grievously swimming in an orgy of unwritten idles. Intention is an arable pork of risible seams, a topographical soteriology, paired in serous mushrooms from socius to amyl nitrate. Eyeball transubstantiates a prosthetics of otic buffoons baffled before segmented crucible apprehension, agrarian gloves covet the textually consanguine, pout of the idyll, acerbically incestuous apothegm venomously thematic. Hope eves the core of a ribald ladder. I waver recalcitrant flattered by the spleen of urges, but genre prunes the moulting imbricate, beggars into the altruistic letter. I offal spawning the consciously autumnal salacious, but advice beneath the adverbial limbic, peering elitist dregs, annuls the bust of a biblical orifice, our transposition in onions tentatively symbiotic. Collusion cocoons Carpocratic models of supportive leash, altered thecal lactation the coalescence of a cocooned asp. The postmodern application of by-products pragmatically slack grounds diction in beguiled as techne, a

balneology of native arias, secret hinterlands geologically autobiographical, the timid teleology of a pistol secreted in dance. I have always pictorial apex grants as orchestra bitten horded affidavits relimn spittoon snorkeled before a torso, but tars of the soul, boll weevil insouciance, grey ragweed issued towards graft canary, cessation accentuates the juncture of the profiles, carbine unlit in ammunition throes, attrition of bladders reading suborned ambergris, pleroma laughs a wicker susurrus, labyrinth, I vicariously offered underwrite modem host collated weather to eel facts reeling this leaf laborious sonnets. Forget the cures of actual text locomotion. Time edits the ring. Three ectomies on the nod in the middle of a poetical hone. I veer and collapse in deities, a prosperous expunge. The orangutan burns to its exile in gazelle. Oriented to perdition, pestles and delirious tense, ontic beacons. If fairly pickles vanity is lyric ease, Aristotelian potatoes, then sausage discursive prescriptive logic lens ladder text surrounding a light pensive itch. The terrible poesis of proportionate silence ferrets an interface spoken lizards above splintered grain sprawls golf purulent apropos to oxidation signifiers, fluidly govern, the reagent flange of terror lingers in spoked murmur, an anatomy of gesture fearfully structured, lamps ladled to Sandinista totality, bricolage fallen to horned clef, against clasp bartered gambits to molar coins. .4 of mackerel thought which envelops the subjunctive of layers as its background. This leaf laurel hand cone whore ritual switch pronoun his poetry redacts becomes forgery of elision toddler in winter against the plectrum of technology. Procured umbilical leisure resounds of the posture recessive in nativity of locution. Text itself is beaten to a flatulent pulp of will. These grapes are at the bottom of editorial sound. Mergers proposed as closets to the poetical whimpering, threnody notation and banal signature, flung avowal technological autonomy midpoint to implicate mourn. The reaction harsh against epistemological bone. Hyperion, Shinto, a baggage of alterity, into baleful expedience as severity and costume, the autistic tethers its forks to a graze of time, eye aspic inheres in eidetic happenstance. It is our mandate to sway from a visceral sex grounded in previous awning the autonomy of germs in a stable of contested bytes. The orally written is consciously obstructed by the overt blunders of its return to exhale. Intentional salamanders saddled radish pages his limen cork. Graze a notable orgy of time, advantage to the scissors, it is later than the torsion of Oriental poems, teeth alembic follicles, relish to inquisitive solitaire, the lapses of the pear seriously open to relapse and appearance. An embolic insistence beckons from socialist eggs against the word.

A FEW NOTES ON TIM GAZE

Rühe Lucentezza

Surplus chamomile pornography and transvestite spice luggage unnerves a precocious femur in anthology. Impossible embedded debacle gauges splattered language, reluctant needs of the written pachyderm, ghouls crenelated by aggression and fraught doggerel. Plural glands coil the explosion toggle, sure irresolute latencies proffered as sinecure, lung inflation a marsh of ale and flexed prurience. Timid yodels cereal hex grackle testes. Burn to exhume a motile cull. Terror dislodges her specialist legs. Build your eye out of a sylvan hiatus, brain as the positron corrosive, nicer than the outside swordfish of a self. Proton love supplants a slapdash trickery of

health. The devil prides the holster of subterranean lesions, but breast witch environs pornography wobble in a wire of words. Setting totem in a vowel of tea. Street pistil impedance annihilates indehiscent rounders, but the rally is as hale and intelligent as a clergy. Time bomb serif, pencil to regalia, gash of thigh ally grapheme. Ten academics arranged in blathering thunder argue a silly license, clans of holistic wound, conical crural punctual in selfish abounds. Barbarians scorn the rage of the alto. His torque plays a rabble thunder. Semen courts erosion petals sedately reckon. 5. perjury of lack in a ground of pterodactyls productively pedagogy textual intuition. Eschew the notorious emplacement of gagged teeth. I germinate a dated indifference overtly plangent. History is thinner than the desire for instantiation.

GAZE

Augen Konne

Splits of combinatory lean-to supplicate the onion smiles, cadence felt bone fish reading the wine to testicular wasp, light appends extant resuscitation to a forlorn love.

I oeuvre and genre layered nouns to his spectrum of naiveté, tampering mythic thought amidst hypothesis,

but the broom of the entrance is the authority of the parlously abstruse,

wizard bled though ladders,

into a quizzical utterance,

antithetical and a tolerance...

A NOTE ON TIM GAZE

Cosa Lasciarlo

Of annually fragrant isthmus, Chernobyl, eye hairs spiked to ambits of combustible onwards, softened by broth and Transylvanian lyres, stellar loins to the suppository process, acme and aesthetics on ice. As the posited subjectivity of an opinionate projectile withers the buttoned assuages in corrosive simplicity, latent similes carbon as a sleight. Augmented cursive prescience the outcome of ambition. It is only through the prehensile lyric culled lemur in ambrosia that raccoon contrition reads the furred love of the clad. Text is a combustible self. Postmodern salad begins to twine its context around a horny axis. Nakedly above supple ledge sloughs notes within doubt opening it anew as wordage fettered lash stricken usurious engaged, as if a bacterial poetry is the mucous of the coelacanth. Deviously hadal coral strands

apportioned sheep the writer beacons as a written of the possible affix. Incessant interference. Excess multiplies the postmodern ghost subtracted from its venous resurrection. Cyclone multiplied by percolated aggression breeds the hiss of a token love. The poetry is a pragmatics.

2001

jim leftwich, 3.12.01,
Useless Writing,
in Things Rescued From Eternal Non-Existence

asemic writing, by which I mean writing that is shifted intentionally towards the unreadable, towards image, without discarding entirely all vestiges of either the letter or the line, and without assuming the alternative status of visual art. it is a hybrid writing, a writing not meant for a reading mingled with an imaging not meant for looking. it is a useless, mutant writing, its uselessness a mutagen for the writer.

2002

jim leftwich, email to lanny quarles, 2002

i came to the asemantic through poetry. i spent years counting syllables, until finally the syllable came apart, and the unit of composition became the letter. at that point everything came apart - everything semantic, at least - and it was an inevitable next step to begin exploring permutations of the letters. this led to a sort of calligraphy, a quasi-alphabetical non-semantic writing utilizing neither syntax nor grammar, and from there to page-as-field compositions consisting of letteral scrawls and squiggles, mutated geometric forms, gestural improvisation and doodling.

Michael Basinski, The Hold, September 2002

Switch - by Tim Gaze.2002. Anabasis/Xtant.

Unconscious at Cape Paterson - by Tim Gaze & Cornelis Vleeskens. 2002.

Anabasis/Xtant.

Xtant is Jim Leftwich, 1512 Mountainside Ct., Charlottesville, VA 22903-9707.

Anabasis is Thomas Lowe Taylor, Oysterville, Washington 98641-0216. Write to these folks about prices and other good great books. www.anabasispress.com

Visual works. I am sure that these are examples of imaginative deep writing, they being other symbols and lines merged into new forms or developing alphabets - now we have a name for these works - Asemic writing. That is the word: Hear it: ASEMIC. But for me the delight of these books, written in Asemic, is the reading of this work - because the new writing in these new worlds/works with other alphabets demands a form of reading that translates into sound each glyph or string, poem- therefore new sounds must be made and the expansive experience is then IT. Wonderful to touch down on this terrific planet of other writing. These authors stretch it and brake it and broke it and IS now someplace else ... in the other... place of creativity. Obviously the air is there breathable, beautiful. Let's go. Paint your wagon, and come along.

Michael Basinski, The Hold, December 2002

Staceal 1 - by Jim Leftwich.

2002. Unpaged but there has got to be a hundred. Avantacular Press.

1813 Belmar Drive A5, Fort Collins, CO. 80526. \$11.23

(Let me must write that this visual work, poems are in the broad general a poetry that demands eyes and ears working as if these senses were wed and web and that somehow there is this sexuality/textuality that you must come to.) You see you must read as an improvisation. So you must write improvisation. Here Leftwich follows the designs of the speaking imagination that does not speak with dictionary words. Staceal is a neologism. Neologisms rejoice! Leftwich's work is a reading vertical rather than narrative or even elliptical progression. As one enters the OPEM, that is a work without boundaries, sort of the way your ship travels in the universe, so then the imagination enters the contexts and the reading is a finding and discovery, slipping the hand that is the mind undercover to come upon. The upon is where you are at as a poet. Not where the French would like you to be. Not where the academy or the non-academy would wish you to be. But where the poetic source? THE GREAT PO! Is. Yore Is, is the place Leftwich's Opems arrive.

2003

jim leftwich, 02.27.03,
originally published in ASEMIC THEORIES,
by Andrew Topel,
Annihilator Press, Australia, 2003

destabilization of the alphabeticals disables received strategies of reading, thus opening the asemic text to interpretive experiences outside the set of acceptable interactions as reading. consensus reality is not communicable by an asemic field. structural censorship constraining the spectrum of permissible experience is not enforceable within an asemic field. hierarchical stratifications of the dominant culture, delineating slots and roles for authorities and subalterns, are available only as transparently arbitrary constructions within an asemic field. the asemic text offers an alternative subjectivity, a site for extrapolations of the experiential, in direct opposition to any homogenous template sanctioned in the diminished capacities of socially- and linguistically-constructed identities. the asemic writer extends an openness, an absence, to the reader. as one route through this absence, we might posit the provisional reinvention of reading as a radical extrapolation of subjective experience. nomadic reading strategies along the rhizome of the asemic insinuate fractal basins for the anarchic subject.

Michael Basinski, The Hold, September, 2003
Death Text Book 5 - by Jim Leftwich.
2003. Xtant books. 50 or more unnumbered pages. Jim Leftwich, 1512 Mountainside Ct.,
Charlottesville, VA, 22903-9707. Write for price.

Someone enters who might be a reader. There are these pages of color images of women in bikinis, provocative, erotic. And they are wearing and merging, emerging from the letters. So it is Eros that pulls me to the page and I read with that arrow in my heart and Leftwich creates a communion of language and image, with metaphors of hieroglyphs and petroglyphs and texts layered upon created and found text, juxtaposing meaning upon meaning, Eve and Gilgamesh and this horrible American fiasco in Iran, in that place of our original sexual sin energy. And what is wonderful about this text is that the text is not obliterated but coaxes with enough meaning to force a reading, an enter-gazing not by meaning but by imagination. Jim Leftwich, I am happy to see that he has leaped to yet another other place. I'm comin, I'll be there. Come-on. Let's leap.

2004

Michael Basinski, The Hold, February, 2004

Asemia - by Tim Gaze and Jim Leftwich and Louise Tourney and Joe Maneri and Abdourahamane Diarra.

2003. 96 pages. Anabasis. Xtant, 1512Mountianside Ct. Charlottesville, VA 22903-9707. Write for price.

A form or branch of verbo-visual poetry, Asemic writing is an original progression within this genre. Thank the Gods (and Pixies) some poets are getting beyond the 1960s and into something other than simulations of Finlay or Cobbing, although, thank the Gods if these had a proto-generator it might be Cobbing. But, nevertheless, Asemia strikes out boldly into a form of writing that locates itself in primitive emotive states, pre-aural, pre-intellectual, when the sound of emotions took forms like these. Carefully rendered glyphs of proto or other writing the works ask the reader to fully engage them via what senses might be strongest in their particular reading field. They are not puzzles. Not riddles waiting to be solved but works that form a state of being that might be or should be the imaginative state. Like keyholes into the substructure of the spiritual life of letters and words enter and enjoy. Maneri writes a sequence of 24 spirit poems – sort of a form of spiritually dictated or guided automatic poetry! Poet as medium – I like it. Not seen this! And Diarra is from Mali – my first read of a vis-poet from that continent. We speak to each other with a poetry form from the other! Wow again. Wow.

Michael Basinski, The Hold, June, 2004

Asemic Magazine. No. 3. - Tim Gaze, editor.

P.O. Box 1011, Kent Town, SA 5071, Australia. You gotta write to Tim for the price or send some dollars – I understand he is outta work so he needs support. Ya can't expect something for nothing. See – being a poet means you be broke and broke – down-under or up-under – don't matter. Maybe send a lettuce!

Now... why a magazine? – ? “Paper has more presence than electronic media” that's a quote from Tim Gaze – I mean you gotta like this poet – him being Australia's and world's inonavigator and flashlight light into the darkness. Visual poets and poets or all stripes gotta wish there were more Gazes. And you see Asemic is the best new brand new nude thing coming in visual poetry in twenty years! Let me quote, “The world “asemic” means having no semantic content.” That means it is not writing but writing that demands improvisation to translate. This means there is no arrogance of learned poet. This means sound improvisation is always a possibility – all works sing! This means pagan – pre meaning. Ah! What joy. All favorites of visual poetry work within this one like Ross Priddle, Jim Leftwich, Jack Berry, Ficus!

And more endless. And I was happy to find a Brion Gysin work in the mag also. He was once colleague of William Burroughs. And when I saw it, I said, why yes, Gysin was into this in the 1960s. Now it is asemic and Tim Gaze on his non semantic eastern dragon bakes the cake of this brand new writing form. A fat issue. You need it. You gotta get with it. Remember that small press ushered in visual poetry 40 years ago. Time to reinvigorate this genre again you of small press, you who are gods and goddesses and humble slices of peach pie and black coffee poem.

Geof Huth, April 12, 2004, Asemia Becomes You
[reporting from North Easter Island Circle, Englewood, Florida]

Jim Leftwich explained asemic writing to Tim Gaze this way in a note he sent on 27 Jan 1998: "A seme is a unit of meaning, or the smallest unit of meaning (also known as a sememe, analogous with phoneme). An asemic text, then, might be involved with units of language for reasons other than that of producing meaning."

A history of deliberately asemic writing would be an interesting one to consider. Certainly, it stretches back to the Voynich Manuscript created probably in the 1600s. In modern times, the Lettrists (a vibrant and often overlooked group of visual poetry practitioners that, in its latter years, devolved into the Situationist International, a political movement of no particular import) were eager proponents of asemia, of the power of the symbol without an accepted meaning. The pre-concretist Brion Gysin was one of the first to fiddle with the concept of asemic texts during the early part of the last century.

But the real flowering of this art began at the very end of the 1990s, when visual poets and calligraphers were, more and more frequently, creating texts that no-one could read. Instead, the reader faced a text that had an imbalance of information versus esthetics. As Tim Gaze says, "Writing does not just contain semantic information. It also contains aesthetic information (when seen as a shape or image) and emotional information (such as a graphologist would analyze). Because it eliminates the semantic information, asemic writing brings the emotional and aesthetic content to the foreground."

There are many reasons for this movement towards asemia. One reason must be that the last quarter of the twentieth century was a roiling cauldron of experimentation in the world of visual poetry. More styles and methods of creating verbo-visual works were common then (and now) than ever before. Another reason is that visual poetry, in general, has been trending more towards the visual and away from the verbal. Asemia retains the shape of some possible verbal content, but it is otherwise completely visual. As with the Lettrists, asemic writers of our time may simply be revolting against the dominance of the word, which is virtually omnipresent in our increasingly networked and electronic world. Finally, since asemic writing tends to be

calligraphic, this style of writing marks a return to the simple, talismanic page. As Asemic magazine # 3 notes on its title page, "Paper has more presence than electronic media."

2005

Geof Huth, 4/2005, The International Dictionary of Neologisms

asemic writing

A form of visual poetry constructed entirely of invented letters or characters and, thereby, having no literal semantic meaning. (The first few sheets contained nothing that held any interest for me, but eventually I designed a couple of sheets of asemic writing that I found interesting enough not to discard.) (On each sheet of paper, I found the most careful and controlled asemic writing I've ever encountered.)

2006

Tim Gaze, May 2006, broadside

the continuum between text & image

recognisable images

abstract images

asemic writing

legible writing

I have been working with the idea that there's a continuum extending from images to text.

Where something sits on this continuum is subjective.

One person sees a picture of a horse (recognisable image);

another sees a bundle of lines (abstract image).

One person can read a piece of graffiti (legible writing);

another can't (asemic writing). One person sees an unknown species of writing (asemic writing); another sees spaghetti (abstract image).

2007

MetaFilter community weblog

Asemic Writing

October 13, 2007 7:07 PM [Subscribe](#)

Asemic is a magazine of asemic writing, which is writing without semantic content. The editor is Australian Tim Gaze, who's made the asemic books Aussie Runes and The Oxygen of Truth, volumes 1 and 2. "Only words lie; asemic texts cannot lie."

Kiini Ibura Salaam writes about his reaction to asemic writing. Asemic Calligraphy by Emma Viguier.

posted by Kattullus (74 comments total) 25 users marked this as a favorite

At first I thought this would be about the style of writing that Robert Anton Wilson advocated, being absent of "metaphysical" content... oh, here it is! E-Prime. I couldn't remember what he had called it, and asemic seemed like such a RAW thing to say.

On topic, this reminds me of Arabic calligraphy, a little, where the meaning is obscured by the highly stylized presentation. Of course here, it's 100% presentation and 0% meaning (or the meaning is the presentation, whatever). Interesting!

posted by synaesthetichaze at 7:28 PM on October 13, 2007 [1 favorite]

Halfway through freshman year at Oberlin, my roommate, distraught over the absence of his identical twin brother, descended into madness. (His brother wasn't doing too well either, having decided to commit "mental suicide" by ingesting dozens of hits of acid along with assorted pharmaceuticals.) While building sculptures in our room out of hair and chewing gum, filling our garbage cans with rancid oil from sardine cans (he loved sardines), and erupting into inexplicable storms of laughter, my roommate became enamored of the French "pataphysician"/surrealist Alfred Jarry and decided to write a paper on him for class. At one point I noticed him scribbling in the typed pages (this was before word processors, kids -- the Earth had cooled recently). When I asked him what he was doing, he said that mere English could not accommodate the ideas he needed to express, so, among the lines of type, there were lines of... well.

Wherever you are, Ben, I hope you're well and thriving.
posted by digaman at 7:48 PM on October 13, 2007 [8 favorites]

I once had a friend lose her mind and do something similar. We were traveling in Europe and staying in a hotel for a few days. After a few days she had a psychotic break. She constructed a fort out of pillows and linens where she would sit and speak in a made up language because what she wanted to say couldn't be contained in any human language. Luckily she came out of it and I got her a berth on a plane back to Iceland that left the next day. She's doing well now.
posted by Kattullus at 8:02 PM on October 13, 2007

The asemic calligraphy put me in mind of Xu Bing's Book from the Sky made with Chinese characters of his own invention.
posted by Abiezer at 8:05 PM on October 13, 2007 [3 favorites]

Where's the "Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation" tag?
posted by felix grundy at 8:23 PM on October 13, 2007

Touching stories about the asemic writing of those having a psychotic break.

The deliberate asemic writing by William Burrough's lover, Brion Gysin is the most beautiful I've seen. His art blended Japanese and Arabic calligraphy, self-taught painting techniques, and the use of his "magical grid.". He developed a specific kind of his own, which was, now I know the word for it, asemic.
posted by nickyskye at 8:23 PM on October 13, 2007 [3 favorites]

Although writing as a visual thing interests me, and books in, say, arabic or greek interest me because they make no sense at all to my brain, I have to call some of this what it is: scribbles. Some of the scribbles are pretty, like a few of the calligraphic ones - but others are just scribbles. They say it is writing without semantic content. But without aesthetic content, it's a scribble.

I'm afraid we're running into the same zone as the John Cage thread a while back - these scribbles are, by and large, nothing, and nothing cannot contain something. "Asemic texts cannot lie" may be true, but they also cannot say anything, which kind of makes the lying statement moot. That's like saying birds and planes fly, but not asemic "texts."

2008

Michael Jacobson
On Asemic Writing
Asymptote Interview

The Giant's Fence was put out as a chapbook in 2001. A few years later, in 2005, I released it as a perfect bound book. Forward to 2008, when I created my second novella Action Figures, which is a book of asemic hieroglyphs. I call my books novellas because they do tell my story in an abstract way, or my lack of a story. Lots of pain and joy anyway. 2008 was an important year for another reason: I began to publish asemic work at my blog gallery The New Post-Literate. Tim had been publishing Asemic Magazine since 1999, but I was looking to have a platform which would publish full color asemic works in real time. Some of the early artists I posted were Derek Beaulieu, Tim Gaze, Henri Michaux, Luigi Serafini, Marco Giovenale, Sheila Murphy, Timothy Ely, Cecil Touchon, Jean-Christophe Giacottino, and Mirtha Dermisache and many others. I named the gallery The New Post-Literate because I believe in the evolution of writing, and I feel that asemic writing is the next logical step after conventional literacy. Asemic writing is never going to replace words, but I believe that it does pose an interesting challenge and rivalry to purely verbal communication.

2009

Tim Gaze, Interviewed by Lynn Alexander in Full of Crow, Prate, 2009

I used to write quirky fiction & poetry. somehow, after a holiday in Indonesia, talking in Bahasa Indonesia for 2 months, I started to make wordless squiggles of symbols.

After a few years of research, I became convinced that my squiggles can be considered to be part of a stream of culture, which is widely known now as asemic writing.

I see my own works as emerging from literature, & in particular visual poetry.

for some reason, visual poetry remains the neglected cousin of better-known forms of poetry. however, if you begin to explore, you can find hundreds of examples of visually skewed poems (which don't rely so heavily on the meanings of words), from around the world.

Tim Gaze, January 4, 2009, interviewed by Michael Jacobson

A short definition of "asemic writing" is: something which looks like a form of writing, but which you can't read.

jim leftwich, from an email to bill beamer (2009)

sometime in the mid-90s, probably 97, a visual poet named john byrum sent me a postcard in response to a series of poems i had sent him. the poems were letteral variations of poems by John M. Bennett. in a ps at the bottom of the card byrum wrote something like "if you continue in this vein you will soon be writing asemic poems". that was the first time i saw the word "asemic". tim gaze contacted me around the same time. i was thinking about purely textual asemia. tim was thinking about a more calligraphic form of writing. my textual work was already letteral, and my visual work was breaking the letter-forms down and becoming a poetry of quasi- or sub-letteral marks. i started making quasi-calligraphic works and sending them around to poetry magazines - and calling them asemic. tim was doing something very similar. that was the beginning of what is now being called "the asemic movement". i promoted the practice (and the word itself) very energetically for several years (8 - 10 years or so). tim has been even more energetic and ambitious, and is still going strong. there is a long and complex history preceding all of this, of course, but this is how the current "movement" got underway. tim can tell you much more about the history of the term itself.

Tim Gaze 2009 New Mystics Biography

Tim Gaze works at the very edge of writing. Some of his creations are abstract shapes, which don't even resemble writing. Others resemble distorted writing, or perhaps an unknown script.

These 2 works were made by decalcomania, spreading cheap black paint on a surface, then making marks in the wet paint, then printing off onto a piece of paper.

A recent tendency in visual poetry has been towards illegibility. Many people call these illegible but still textual works "asemic writing".

Christian Dotremont's Logogrammes, Henri Michaux's blot paintings, Adriano Spatola's zeroglyphics & the radical photocopier art by Reed Altemus & Billy Mavreas are all sources of inspiration for my visual creations.

My book noology (free to download) is a collection of asemantic writing & abstract art, with an electronic glitch sensibility.

Neo, my album of home-made futurist sound recordings, will soon be released by Another Hemisphere Records, a Russian net-label.

I live simply in the Adelaide Hills of South Australia. Music is a huge influence on my life.

2010

marco giovenale, Aug., 2010, on asemantic & vispo, from a post by mg

@<http://groups.google.it/group/asemic>

<http://asemicnet.blogspot.com/2011/06/on-asemic-vispo-marco-giovenale-2010.html>

I think the border between asemantic text and abstract art is thin, and if vispo often seems to be "mixed" with abstract stuff, asemantic seems to "be" abstract art. this is because (in my opinion) at a first glance you can often tell the vispo from the abstract, while it's more difficult to tell the asemantic from the abstract. I may be wrong, but I think that when one recognizes symbols as alphabets, series of words, fragmented sentences, twisted letters, the brain starts putting all the letters and symbols etc on one side of its conscience. while if you don't perfectly recognize letters, but you "suspect" they are, your brain works differently, and it seems like you are never completely sure if you're staring at an unknown language or not (so that one can say there's some sort of floating opinion/judgement about the nature of the object you've seen.) this also happens when one meets languages one doesn't know; there's a fascinating echo in Arabic calligraphy for example, we all made this experience. it's a poor example, ok. but it seems to me I can say I'm looking at the Arabic calligraphic drawwritings as if they were sort of asemantic writing (while only an Arab could tell me "hey this is a piece of poetry" or "no, man, these are

meaningless doodles, they only resemble words”.) our language determines our approach to the images: if we –even partially– recognize & decipher the language, we tend to “see [it is] text” (and/or vispo). if we don’t, we still suspect there’s some text (but we say it’s asemic –”to us”).)

2011

Tim Gaze, Winter 2011, Action Yes Online Quarterly
A Quick Introduction To Abstract Comics

A gentle approach to abstraction is for wordless comics, or inscrutable “asemic” writing in speech balloons or thought bubbles, accompanying recognisable scenes. A more radical approach is for completely abstract shapes, which can’t be construed as depicting anything recognisable.

As the objective tone used in the nouveau roman, by novelists such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute and Claude Simon was a new way of narrative storytelling, the most abstract comics offer a completely new realm: is it storytelling or not? Are they attempts to describe non-verbal states of mind? Are they triggers for unfamiliar ways of thinking? They certainly comprise a means of non-verbal communication, with its own (implicit) rules and possibilities.

[...]

Some Brazilian visual poets who were active in the process/poem (Portuguese poema/processo) movement, founded by Wladimir Dias Pino and friends in 1967, used tropes from comics, such as frames and speech balloons. In particular, Alvaro de Sá composed Poemics (Edição Autor, 1991), which he described as “comics metalanguage” and 12 X 9 (edição particular, 1967)

Contemporary visual poets such as Jim Leftwich, Carol Stetser, and Andrew Topel have occasionally used forms similar to comics, or even detoured pre-existing comics.

De Villo Sloan

Definition of Asemic Writing - Adapted from Wikipedia

Posted by De Villo Sloan on March 9, 2011 at 2:05am in Asemic Writing for Mail-Artists

Adapted from Wikipedia

Asemic writing is a wordless open semantic form of writing. The word asemic means “having no specific semantic content.” With the nonspecificity of asemic writing there comes a vacuum of meaning which is left for the reader to fill in and interpret. All of this is similar to the way one would deduce meaning from an abstract work of art. The open nature of asemic works allows for meaning to occur trans-linguistically. An asemic text may be “read” in a similar fashion regardless of the reader's natural language. Multiple meanings for the same symbolism are another possibility for an asemic work.

Some asemic writing includes pictograms or ideograms the meanings of which are sometimes, but not always, suggested by their shapes. Asemic writing, at times, exists as a conception or shadow of conventional writing practices. Reflecting writing, but not completely existing as a traditional writing system, asemic writing seeks to make the reader hover in a state between reading and looking.

Asemic writing has no verbal sense, though it may have clear textual sense. Through its formatting and structure, asemic writing may suggest a type of document and, thereby, suggest a meaning. The form of art is still writing, often calligraphic in form, and either depends on a reader's sense and knowledge of writing systems for it to make sense, or can be understood through aesthetic intuition.

Asemic writing can also be seen as a relative perception, whereby unknown languages and forgotten scripts provide templates and platforms for new modes of expression.

Influences on asemic writing are illegible, invented or primal scripts (cave paintings, doodles, children's drawings, etc.). But instead of being thought of as mimicry of preliterate expression, asemic writing may be considered to be a postliterate style of writing that uses all forms of creativity for inspiration. Other influences on asemic writing are xenolinguistics, artistic languages, sigils (magic), undesipherable scripts, and graffiti. Asemic writing occurs in avant-garde literature and art with strong roots in the earliest forms of writing.

Some Artists and Writers who have done asemic work (please feel free to post others who might be of interest)

Henri Michaux (author, Alphabet)

Cy Twombly

Letterisme - Isadore Isou proposed the poem of the future will be purely formal and devoid of semantic content (visual poetry - literally)

Brion Gysin (collaborations with William S. Burroughs in particular - collage)

Abstract Expressionists - look at Jackson Pollock

Max Ernst (book: Maximilliana: The Illegal Practice of Astronomy (great title)

Roland Barthes (semiotic literary theorist - Writing Degree Zero is a classic)



jim leftwich, Jun 10, 2011, post to the ASEMIC Google Group
there is no such thing as asemic writing.
in fact, there is no such thing as asemic anything.
everything is readable, ie., can be and will be given meaning.
the asemic is an unattainable ideal.
in striving toward it, many mutations of writing and drawing (and other practices: photographing,
to name but one) will come into being.
this is the value of the asemic.
working with asemia (attempting to write it, attempting to read and/or not read it) is a training
exercise, and the products of that training exist as documentation of the process.

John M. Bennett

6/11/11

Jim hits the nail on the head. This is certainly the most useful way of thinking about asemics
I've seen in this discussion!

John Bennett

Tim Gaze

6/11/11

hi all.

it's encouraging to see such different viewpoints tied to the word "asemic".

my actions are almost the opposite to Jim's, yet I feel absolutely in sympathy with him.

I spend a fair amount of time talking to academics who might be interested to attempt to digest
asemic writings. Gerald L Bruns had an essay which argues for the value of difficult-to-read
texts, & quoted Asemic magazine, published in The Cambridge Literary Review #2. (I've seen a
draft, but not the final version.)

"looks like writing to me on this occasion, but I can't get words out of it" is my attempt at a
definition of the area which I'd call asemic writing.

the habit of attempting to read material which appears to be writing is deeply programmed into
our eyes & mind, when we're taught to read. anything which makes us more aware of the largely
involuntary process of reading is probably healthy.

however, someone who was taught to read Chinese characters as a child will have different habits of looking & attempting to read than someone exposed to the Roman letters & English language as a child. the asemic creations which interest me the most are the ones which reach beyond the Roman letters to other writing systems. but Xu Bing's faux Chinese characters don't interest me very much; they only activate more than one stage of the reading process in a viewer who can read a large vocabulary of written Chinese words.

hang on, I'll paste in a quote from an unpublished essay, since no-one else seems to be talking about his particular area:

"Let's say we see a piece of paper. In a split second, we decide if it contains Roman letters: writing. In a further split second, we decide if these letters add up to words. And in a further split second, we decide if those words form sentences. We don't give our permission before we begin the act of reading. It is so deeply habituated that we begin doing it, before we even realise it. It takes an effort of will not to read legible words.

Despite the number of interacting processes necessary for smooth reading to occur (recognising letters, compiling words from the letters, & deriving semantic sense from the collection of words), reading is usually rapid & comfortable. Once we begin this journey along a stream of words, we usually read as fast as we can. In doing so, we preclude the act of looking (as at an image).

What might happen if a page appears to contain writing, but frustrates the reader's attempt to find sentences, or words, or even letters?"

another consideration: the standard history of Writing, where & when it originated, & what it is, feel dishonest & incomplete to me. asemic writing seems to be an important part of the history of symbolic communication by humans. disciplines like Information Theory treat writing in a one-sided manner. we (asemic creators) are fleshing out its other side.

we could certainly talk more about parallels & differences between asemic visual poetry & wordless sound poetry. is anyone else interested in this?

that's probably enough for the moment.

I'm much more inclined to make public postings than to talk in a forum such as this. but I'll bear with it, & see where we go next.

Tim Gaze



from Asemic Writing For Mail Artists, at IUOMA

Comment by John M. Bennett on June 8, 2011 at 4:56pm

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Comment by De Villo Sloan on June 8, 2011 at 5:00pm

JMB - The Lost Ficus School of Poetics. But is it asemic? Or is it about asemics? Or neither?

Comment by John M. Bennett on June 8, 2011 at 5:05pm

Some folks say it's meaningless, so I guess it's asemic to them. So here ya go. I don't think it's asemic at all, but then I'm nuts, eh? Actually, I kinda think there really ain't no such thing as something truly asemic... maybe "god" would be truly asemic?

Comment by John M. Bennett on June 9, 2011 at 3:08pm

Agreed, nothing is random, and agreed, language is the social medium por excelencia par excellence

seeing my text as asemic is an extremist way of seeing it, but it's interesting to think about it in that way

categories like "asemic" or "textual" etc are ways to organize perceptions and thinking, but do not necessarily reflect the reality of experience

It's often revealing to think about something as if it were something else.

Another thing to ponder is that the visual and/or sonic dimensions of a poem include aspects that most people would consider asemic: these are only some of the dimensions of a poem - or of any text, perhaps. One may not be fully conscious of these elements, but they are there

Comment by De Villo Sloan on June 9, 2011 at 7:01pm

John's poem has dislocations of syntax as well as indeterminate words and word references. I also thought it was interesting to ask if that made it asemic. While I'd have to finally say no, there seems to be a real borderland between asemic writing and conventional text.

Some here do use many terms. I'd like to think it's the price you pay for common ground. The work posted seems to constantly defy and question those terms, though.

Comment by John M. Bennett on June 9, 2011 at 8:48pm

The idea that language IS society is a provocative kind of statement designed to make people think about it. I think there are many many other things that form a society, or "society" as a general concept. Tho I suppose if ine defines "society" with a number of very specific and limiting parameters, the statement could ne true. (Such mental gymnastics don;t interest me very much, personally; but I know many folks enjoy them!)

The line between asemic writing and abstract art that Bruno describes is somewhat similar to the line between visual poetry and "fine art" that uses language and/or words

Comment by De Villo Sloan on June 9, 2011 at 8:56pm

not to derail, BUT John also wrote earlier about visual and sonic aspects. I think that means the sound aspect of poetry? The spoken word? Poetry comes out of an oral tradition that was spoken and memorized? Then we've gone through the previous centuries where print dominated and the way it looks on the page became more pronounced. Some poets believe the way they set up the poem on the page and break the lines are a kind of performance score. If I have any of this right, I ponder over what asemic writing would SOUND like? Did i misread?

Comment by John M. Bennett on June 9, 2011 at 11:44pm

yes, but societies - which are organization - arose for many more reasons than early writing or writing-like codes. I think the tendencies for organizing came BEFORE the writing, in fact. Well - people have been debating this basic issues for centuries...

anyway, there is a long tradition of performing and/or vocalizing asemic texts; the futurists and dadaists did it all the time. i have done it myself. It's big fun!

Comment by John M. Bennett on June 10, 2011 at 2:13pm

It's a sort of expressionistic sprechgesang, almost "singing", all improvised, done as part of performances, I don;t have any recordings handy (maybe someone recorded something out there somewhere?) You have to be there!

Sometimes I do a bit of that with parts of my poems that are less semic before I move into the semic parts...

Comment by John M. Bennett on June 10, 2011 at 3:13pm

Bruno, re yr last question: some of my texts are completely asemic in the generally accepted sense of the term, yes - most of that work I did back in the 1980's. Some of my newer work has asemic elements/lines/passages in that sense.

I also will "asemiquize" some passages in performance. by putting something in my mouth, for example.

Blaster Al Ackerman has a great performance he used to do where he read some of his texts with a bar of soap in his mouth. wonderful.

john

Comment by De Villo Sloan on June 10, 2011 at 9:49pm

I hope I can find the Blaster Al Ackerman performance some place. Sonic asemics - I'm still reeling over that. Leave it to JMB



rosaire appel, Jun 10, 2011, post to the ASEMIC Google Group

I myself frequently use asemic writing to indicate actual writing - as a placeholder for actual writing, doesn't matter what language/ we know more or less what it says since all things said in language are pretty familiar by now - so it seems to me. we all know pretty much the same things, have the same information, though we have different points of view of them. indications can be read without needing actual words - a different kind of reading. asemic writing is also a way of leaping forward into territory not yet conceptualized.... a transition strategy perhaps.

bruno neiva , 6/10/11

A response to Marco Giovenale's On asemic and vispo

1. It's highly important to distinguish a vispo from an asemic. And yes, they may be called "cousins".

The connection of both to many types of abstract art is also relevant. And I agree that asemics may be closer to it than vispos.

2. Asemic: it looks like writing but it's not part of any writing code. It has semantic meaning, but no verbal one. Imitation of writing. Imitation of shapes of characters, ideograms, symbols, pictograms. Imitation of curvatures, lines and textures that resemble of written language and of some abstract art. Uncoded signs that may interact with coded ones. Processes: many. An ever-growing and ever-challenging lot.

3. Structural research should not be forgotten it when it comes to define what asemic writing is. Sign systems such as languages are collective, cooperative structures. If asemic writing is a shadow writing with no verbal meaning, then it doesn't matter if an individual reader knows a language or not when it comes to call a text "asemic". If a writing code exists as a system, even if beyond the grasp of many individuals, then it can never be called asemic writing.

Marco Giovenale, maintenant #65, June 14th, 2011, Interview with SJ Fowler

MG: it seems to me that the "language-plus-art" areas in which we usually put the asemic writing are mostly inhabited and loved by the visual poets and collectors of vispo artists, rather than by art gallery owners or artists. Many experimental poets, too, love the asemic zones of the world wide web.

[...]

3:AM:Your asemic work often takes on the form of a fluid script, akin to a signatory handwriting perhaps. How did this practise develop?

MG: It definitely is fluid handwriting, often. The texts and signs are usually born & woven at the same time with some complicated story or notes I actually write then overwrite, just like superimposed strata of meaning (or safe exits from any fixed meaning). Sometimes the lines and fragments I (dra)write deal with trivial events, sometimes they are long essays I writerase. (Since, you know, to write two or more times on the same line is kind of erasure).

[...]

MG: As for theory, I must admit that in my mind the two areas of (hyper)semantic or absurdist or –generally speaking– experimental writing on one side, and the asemic work on the other, are for me two sides of the same coin. I always am in some kind of path 'against the power' of (established) meaning(s). I am always in a difference/differance, when writing or drawriting or simply drawing.

De Villo Sloan, August 24, 2011, Asemic Writing for Mail-Artists, IUOMA

Eco-Asemics is a term used to describe Asemic Writing found in asemic-suggestive shapes in the natural environment. Artists exploring Eco-Asemics often use photographs; however, incorporation in art could be done in numerous ways. The potential for Haptic-Eco-Asemics is vast. Eco-Asemics might be found in rock formations, sand, trees and plants - anywhere that your mind can locate potential signs, symbols, and structures in nature. Eco-Asemics is somewhat different from human-made asemic writing taken from environments created or altered by people (found art - Asemic Trashpo), but there certainly is overlap.

De Villo Sloan, Asemics 16, Collaborative Mail-Art Book Project
INTRODUCTION TO EDITION 1, August 8, 2011

The realm of asemic writing includes the invention of imaginary languages with corresponding symbols and systems for their arrangement. Asemic writing suggests a language, might at times reveal traces of known language, but ultimately cannot be read as any existing language or extinct language that has been recorded. Through the absence, discontinuity or disruption of

conventional signification, new meanings and realizations are made possible. Visual and material elements of written language are brought to the forefront.

[...]

Asemic writing is also a medium that can be illuminated and explained through advanced cultural theory in fields including semiotics and linguistics. It addresses deeply philosophical questions involving indeterminacy, incomprehensibility, and meta-language.

De Villo Sloan, Asemics 16, Collaborative Mail-Art Book Project
INTRODUCTION TO EDITION 2, August 10, 2011

This second edition is rich in approaches to creating asemic writing. You will see beautiful and highly expressive cursive script where letters, words, and phrases emerge, mirage-like – hinting at a message to the reader – only to fade elusively back into incomprehension and fragmented shapes that rise and fall from the unconscious. Other artists take a material approach, fragmenting the existing letters into new symbols and syntax. Many of the artists have focused on placing their asemic work in a relationship with other images, often creating a narrative context and inventing various hybrid visual-textual forms.

De Villo Sloan, Asemics 16, Collaborative Mail-Art Book Project
INTRODUCTION TO EDITION 3, August 15, 2011

Much asemic writing today mimics symbols transcribed on an otherwise blank page: written correspondence (cursive asemics), the printed page of a book. Perhaps because visual artists have delved into asemics as well as writers, color, images, textiles, found text and objects – among other material – are sometimes employed to provide context and suggest narratives. Mail-artists, in particular, seem to favor liberally incorporating the visual arts. This accounts for much of the visual richness of Asemics 16.

This approach is a common thread connecting the work of members of the Asemics 16 project; the result is the creation of hybrid forms that meld traditional distinctions between the visual image and linguistic symbol (visual poetry) – pushing us ahead into the era of post-literature and, paradoxically, pushing us back to the illuminated book and ultimately back to the archaic, to the origins of language and symbols. A fascinating aspect of this edition is the artists who find asemic symbols in nature; it is almost as if they wished to erase the heavy accumulation of culture over centuries and millennia to begin anew. Others prefer to sift among the ruins of older worlds for inspiration.

De Villo Sloan, Asemics 16, Collaborative Mail-Art Book Project

INTRODUCTION TO EDITION 4, The Mountain of Signs, September 21, 2011

In 1936, Antonin Artaud visited Mexico hoping to find among its indigenous peoples the foundation for a new civilization that would revitalize and replace what he perceived to be the failed cultures of Europe. Artaud made contact with the Tarahumara tribe and in order to reach them had to traverse a desolate region which he named “The Mountain of Signs.”

Artaud’s written account of the difficult journey on horseback contains a remarkable passage where he witnessed the natural rock formations and twisted trees around him transform into marvelous inscriptions, hieroglyphs, fantastic statues depicting myths that he could not read or understand but that suggested vast systems of language chronicling an ancient world alive and energized not by reason but by an alternative source he could only name as magic.

Artaud’s vision of “The Mountain of Signs” is an early and wonderful description of the experience of encountering and creating asemics and aptly captures the spirit of this fourth edition in the Asemics 16 project, which can fairly be described as artistic magic.

The fascinating practice of asemic writing includes the invention of imaginary languages with corresponding symbols and systems for their arrangement. An asemic text suggests a language, might at times reveal traces of a known language, but ultimately cannot be read as any existing language or extinct language that has been recorded. Yet, as the pages ahead reveal, asemic writing is far from being devoid of human expression. Indeed, it succeeds on a global scale where language so often falls short.

Much of the work in this fourth edition tests the boundaries and practices of asemic writing itself as they are currently understood, further validating and extending Artaud’s experience. The artists have found inspiration for their work in all areas of their environments, creating amazing symbols and structures. As a result, new directions are presented and possibilities for expression are enlarged.

United by their involvement in the international mail-art network, contributors to this edition are accomplished painters, collage artists, photographers, conceptual artists, and visual poets. Applying their considerable talents to asemic writing (arguably most strongly aligned with literature), they have produced work that is visually stunning and provocative.

While some might seek to secure firm lines between abstract art with asemic elements and asemic texts, the work in edition four – to the contrary – disregards these distinctions between text and image in favor of creating altogether new forms. Thus, as the Asemics 16 project has progressed, the term asemic writing has given way, through a shared consensus, to the concept of asemics, which seems to be far more open and inclusive.

In their willingness to experiment and explore their imaginations, the contributors to Asemics 16 – Edition #4 open up the possibility of new worlds and new forms of expression.

De Villo Sloan, Asemics 16, Collaborative Mail-Art Book Project

INTRODUCTION TO EDITION 5, ASEMIC SYNTAX, November 16, 2011

In this fifth edition of the Asemics 16 collaborative book project, we asked contributors to address the concept of syntax in asemic writing.

Asemics 16 editions document diverse approaches to the creation of written texts whose symbols do not disclose meaning through the conventional process of reading and are thus considered devoid of content (a structuralist's dream of form without content?). In linguistic terms, it is writing where the relationship between the signifier and signified has been irrevocably severed; even codes are not fair game.

In the same way the marvelous work by the contributors creates imaginary languages or distorts and fractures existing languages beyond recognition, the ghost or suggestion of larger structures that bind the symbols together appear in the work through asemic punctuation, asemic grammar, guides for linearity (for example Cheryl Penn (South Africa) experimented with writing backwards), or the simultaneous perception of glyph forms. Asemic syntax mirrors the structures of languages and their written representations but in no way provides content. (What then are we to make of asemic fiction?)

The work in this edition shows clearly a traditional connection between asemic writing and concrete poetry, a shared interest in the materiality of written language. Brion Gysin's formative work, following his expulsion from the Surrealist movement by Breton, provides an historic checkpoint for the Asemics 16 artists.

Gysin's later asemic writing evolved from his calligraphy using Arabic and Japanese. Combining the Arabic and Japanese symbols naturally produced grid structures: A move toward creating asemic syntax as well as the distinctive abstract structures we associate with concrete poetry; grid structures are used frequently in concrete poetry. An important point is they are grounded in syntax.

2012

lit in small doses

Tuesday, October 9, 2012

Asemic fantasies

by Olen

1. The asemic is a dynamic, unstable category. Something can be asemic to a lot of people, but how can we tell that it will still be to someone else in the future or in a different situation? What can be "absolutely" asemic is an open question. What is asemic may end up becoming

meaningful to someone later on. However, we should qualify this by saying that asemic writing primarily refers to two conditions: first, a suspicion holds that a given specimen belongs to or instantiates a sign or writing system; second, that this "system" is inaccessible or unknown in an absolute way. Specimens of asemic writing are indeed given "second-order" meaning (as a style in art, for example), and "asemic" has its own definition, but this is all happening in a sign system (English) that is external to the sign system suspected to be used in a specimen of asemic writing. Even the intentional production of asemic art or writing does not "betray" its asemic nature. The question then becomes: How is it possible for anyone already possessing a language to produce something in another "projected" or "imagined" sign system where the producer pretends to have no access? Isn't asemic writing a species of fantasy?

[...]

5. Asemic art or writing cannot be absolutely accidental, or else it won't be "writing." Asemic writing is a marking that is assumed to be a part of an unknown sign system, not a foreign language or an ancient language that just needs deciphering. Secondly, it is also assumed to have some "intelligence" in it that remains undiscovered or irrecoverable. This is what sets it apart from natural processes or accidental marks. A gash on the paint of a car may be interpreted as an evidence of a minor collision, but is not considered to be a specimen of writing. It is simply "forensic" evidence.

[...]

9. Only in divination can accidents and natural events act as "messages" from the gods, or as forms of writing. Forced to consider nature and accidents as "messages," I can only admire the diviner's access to the system of writing that I don't have, which transforms nature into an asemic language whose words and meaning completely escape me. "Automatic writing" can also produce scribbles whose illegibility can be considered asemic, unless assigned a meaning via supernatural or psychological interpretations. These are only two examples where asemic instances get transformed into signifying artifacts.

Posted by olen at 8:52 AM

INTERVIEW MICHAEL JACOBSON, Without semantic content, asemic writing becomes total in what it can express, On January 18, 2013 by samplekanon

SampleKanon: Asemic writing can be defined as writing without semic content, writing as pure form. Yet asemic works can still generate meaning. Could you tell how this manifests itself in your work?

Michael Jacobson: Without semantic content, asemic writing becomes total in what it can express. The meaning of an asemic work is not fixed. It is allowed to evolve. It can change, mutate, and time travel. Asemic writing is a wild animal that has taken from art what it needs to survive and no more. The point I am trying to make is: an asemic work can have zero meaning, or a billion meanings, just don't tie it down; let it fly.

Michael Jacobson, On Asemic Writing, Asymptote, (2013)

1997 was the year of genesis for the current movement of asemic writing. It's when visual poet Jim Leftwich and Tim Gaze connected and started sending out quasi-calligraphic works to poetry magazines and calling them asemic. I was doing something similar in '98, but I didn't make contact with them until 2005, when I had the resources to officially publish and had gained Internet access.

17 March 2013. "Michael Jacobson Interview." SCRIPTjr.nl.

Quimby Melton: In addition to your curatorial work with The New Post-Literate, you've written two of your own asemic texts: Action Figures (imgs. 1-5) and The Giant's Fence (imgs. 6-9). Do you see your work as part of a cryptotext tradition that includes the Voynich manuscript and Codex Seraphinianus?

Michael Jacobson: First, I have to say I'm a terrible cryptographer. Readers should know that if they're going to look for codes in my work. Nevertheless, I can say, with some confidence, that the Voynich manuscript is more relevant to my asemic writing than the Codex Seraphinianus. I'm much more familiar with that text and have been since I began developing my personal calligraphic style. Tim Gaze, of asemic.net and SCRIPTjr.nl's editorial board, introduced me to the Codex Seraphinianus a few years ago, and it's a very interesting book. But the Voynich manuscript seems more significantly proto-asemic to me. That is, I think the text may very well reveal its secrets if one studies it in terms of visual aesthetics rather than semantics.

Part of me hopes the Voynich will never be deciphered, but who knows? Maybe it's written in an extinct European language that could be translated if we found the right Rosetta Stone. Undeciphered languages, in fact, influence my work a good deal. The Giant's Fence, for example, was influenced by Rongorongo and illegible graffiti.

2014

Olchar Lindsann, Preface to The Outer Circle: Ideas and Forms of the Contemporary Avant-Garde, 2014

This exhibition's connection to the Marginal Arts Festival is not without reason; it is the result of several long-standing connections between Roanoke and the communities represented here. For reasons discussed in this catalog, much of the current work of the Russian avant-garde utilizes and explores Asemic Writing: the use of letterforms that do not refer to existing alphabets, to express subconscious thought or communication. While explorations in this direction can be traced back indefinitely, the Roanoke avant-garde community has played an important role in the development of Asemia as a self-conscious movement. The term itself was first championed by the Roanoke poet and theorist Jim Leftwich (then living in Charlottesville) and Australian writer Tim Gaze (also shown here, in collaboration with Russian asemic writers); while even a wikipedia search for Asemic Writing shows that many of the early developers of the form have long-standing relationships with the MAF, including John M. Bennett, Reed Altemus, Geoff Huth, and Roanoke artist and musician Billy Bob Beamer.

The Russian avant-garde journal Slova, whose contributors formed the kernel of the exhibition, has published translations of theoretical texts and poetry by Roanoke-based Olchar Lindsann (the writer of this Preface) and a number of past and present MAF guests. The decentralized underground press Mycelium, published in Russia, Roanoke, and other places around the world, has printed bilingual editions of writers from Roanoke and cities in Russia and across the globe, including books by many MAF participants. Roanoke's mOnocle-Lash AntiPress is releasing two books by writers included in this show.

The main conduit for all of these relationships has been the Eternal Network—a web of countless intersecting avant-garde communities who communicate and collaborate through Mail Art, Chapbook and 'Zine circulation, performance scores, multiple identities, online projects and many other strategies. That Asemia and Visual Poetry should play such a large role in this exchange is natural: it affords us the means to communicate and collaborate across the double-gap of not only different languages, but different alphabets. There is a third gap however, which further volatilizes these challenges: that of history.

Without the contributions of Russian writers, artists, linguists, and theorists the avant-garde as we know it today would be unthinkable. Beginning at least with the start of the 20th Century, Russia was a centre of the international avant-garde, in which movements such as Zoum, Oberiu, various Futurist collectives, and dozens of other groups less well-known or understood in the West pioneered experimentation with the a-rational, subconscious, and physical aspects of language. The roots of today's Visual Poetry, Lettristic writing, and Asemia lie in the activity of these groups, as do many traditions of abstraction in the visual arts, dance, experimental music, and semiotics. From the turn of the century until the proscription of formally experimental creative activity some thirty years later, Russian avant-gardists collaborated closely with their international comrades in every sphere of activity.

2015

De Villo Sloan, Trash Tropes: Trashemic Essays by Jim Leftwich (Roanoke, Virginia, USA)
Posted by De Villo Sloan on October 17, 2015

The Trashemic Essays are innovative in the Trashpo realm because, for the first time that I am aware, they present a rhetoric of trash or, more precisely, an anti-rhetoric or trash talk using what I identify as the trash trope. Until now, Trashpo has seldom attempted to penetrate complex, linear texts or patterns of narrative and logic in order to create Trashpo. Trashpo has pursued what I call D-Khaos, which is anti-formal and non-rational. The result has been a kind of lyric intensity akin to a tiny vacuum for individual works. Poetry can be rhetorical, so a debate about whether these pieces are vispo or rhetoric would be pointless. I see the presence of the trash trope as the vital structural element here. In this case, the trash trope functions as a textual disruptor.

The emerging narrative of asemic writing is being disrupted and questioned in the essays. Notice that the foundation pieces for the Trashemic Essays are relatively linear, conventionally readable texts about asemic writing. Material text/image unites used in the composition of Trashpo are interjected over and into the texts about asemic writing to create disruption, disjunction but new possibilities for meaning as well. In these pieces, the trash is actually merged with the material about asemic writing, suggesting physical action taken against the text. Far from conceptual, I see the essays as deeply materialist.

Asemic-Pansemic [Marco Giovenale]

+plus+

Why we continue using the term asemic writing, even though there is no such thing [Jim Leftwich]

in Script jr nl, literature's last frontiers

Posted by Marco Giovenale on Monday, April 27, 2015

Asemic-Pansemic

Jim leftwich is definitely right in saying there's no actually perfect 'asemic' thing or sign, since everything conveys some meaning, everything may find its way to—at least— an inner 'emotional' (scribble of) meaning.

He speaks of "pansemia" (from the Greek prefix "pan-" = all), and in doing so he just suggests that everything emits/expresses (or is an echo of) some semantically rich sign, always provided with almost a shadow of meaning; so everything makes sense, and a bunch of meaningful directions may always be attached to the invisible arrows uprising from any of the written traces we imagine and conceive and make or find.

That said, it seems to me that a 'proper' (?) asemic area can be seen in the zone of the mind opaquely linking our expectations for a known written linguistic message and content to an actually unknown shape of glyph.

A whole text or drawing appears in front of us as an asemic 'thing', indecipherable to the intellect that does not recognize the language; but at the same time it may be meaningful (and, yes, beautiful) to the ...taste, perception... soliciting some sort of empathy.

I not only think of the written walls of our cities, nor the practice of asemic writing in itself alone. I'd also like to refer to the mere visible... lines among things. The borders and boundaries of blocks and knots of streets as seen from a satellite eye. Or to the written code of rain in a pool of wet cement. Or to casual traces of animals (and men) in caves. Etc.

As soon as we—in looking at them— think to superimpose the shapes of some possible written language, we abruptly discover anything may actually be code, message, and at the same time it isn't. We dwell in uncertainty. It defies any attempt we try to put in practice in order to understand, decipher. But, in doing so, it makes some other opaque meaning arise. Kind of cloud of possibilities. A haze of "make sense" hovering everywhere and around the specific written layer we're facing.

Marco Giovenale

* * *

Why we continue using the term asemic writing, even though there is no such thing:

i think all human experience has semantic content.
that's why i think asemic writing is a kind of aspirational writing.
we aspire to create an asemic writing, a writing without semantic content.
and we fail.
so we try again, and fail again.
if we genuinely care about the practice, we repeat this process over and over, for a long time.
eventually, we lose all hope of achieving our goal.
we lose faith in the goal.
we no longer believe in our ability to create an asemic writing.
so we decide upon an alternative goal.
we decide the process has never been about the product, the object, the poem. it has always
been only about the process.
it has always been about the process of training the mind, perhaps of quieting the mind (to
borrow a phrase from John Cage).
it is a writing against itself, and more than that, a writing against the self.
that is how it can be compared to a spiritual discipline, like zazen or hesychasm, or zerufe otiot.
that is why standards of aesthetic quality are worse than irrelevant to the process.
and, that is also why a hierarchy of practitioners is worse than irrelevant in this context.
Jim Leftwich

ottawa poetry newsletter
Sunday, March 15, 2015

Serial Interview with Bruno Neiva
by rob mclennan

B: The shift from “asemic” to “avermal” occurred in 2011, shortly after the aforementioned
exhibition in Spain. I do find some asemic art quite interesting (Rosaire Appel, Tim Gaze, Jim

Leftwich, etc.) but most if it is quite indulgent, mere scribbling and doodling devoid of a worthy program. So I felt the urge of distancing the sort of work I was developing back then from such practices (both theoretically and aesthetically) and came up with the word “avermal” that means something that you can’t read. I never belonged to an asemic group and I’ve never meant to create an avermal group. It was sheer provocation against orthodoxy.

But both “avermal” and “asemic” are quite misleading terms as they only refer to verbal and written language. This body of work is comprised of images and objects that have linguistic elements embedded in them. It may be that in some cases the linguistic features are the most noticeable, but in my opinion, in all of them we’re dealing with abstract images with language qualities. As a result, a new semiotic approach to the connections/relations between abstract art and visual poetry is necessary. For that matter, so is a terminology that allows us to discuss cross-genre artistic practices such as this one.

Tim Gaze <gazetim@bigpond.com>

7/25/15

to me, Marco, John, Slobodan, De, suzan, Olchar, Nico, andrew
now that the horse has bolted...

it’s been hard to find the time & mental space to assemble decent thoughts, but here goes.

asemic writing occupies an important place in visual literacy. A few academics are tiptoeing around it, but it hasn’t been engulfed & digested by big, mainstream knowledge yet. I’ve tried to make contact with a few experts on visual literacy & visual rhetoric, but haven’t had any loud success.

trying naively to find my own raw, international, pan-human approach to handwriting has been part of my journey into asemic writing. I taught myself the bare rudiments of Chinese calligraphy, & have tried to fuse an East Asian sensibility with my Roman letter writing habits. In my opinion, practicing writing from top to bottom of a page, or from right to left along a line can put one’s mind closer to other cultures.

anecdotes from reactions to my writing:

one day I was photocopying my attempts at ancient Chinese tortoise shell script. An elderly Asian man was next to where I was working. I asked him shyly what he thought of my handiwork. He grumpily replied: I can’t read that! That’s ancient Chinese.

a friend with Korean ancestry said that one of my squiggles looked like a Chinese bunnyrabbit. when I took Chinese lessons for about 8 weeks, my teacher said my writing looked like a child’s writing. I asked was that good or bad? She said it looked like a Chinese child’s writing.

I've also attempted to write Arabic & Hebrew at different times, for shorter periods. Attempted Indian scripts, but don't have a feeling for them yet. Also Korean hangul writing. After calm, careful practice, I would often cut loose & improvise to make asemic compositions.

so, pan-writing or multi-lingual writing (but mostly without words) is something I'm striving for, & would be pleased to see others doing.

I've said elsewhere how important improvisation is for me. There are plenty of potential links between music & asemic writing which haven't much been explored. Joe Maneri's pages in the book *Asemia* sat comfortably.

where the water begins to get muddy is when I overlap my interest in pictographic symbols. Many pictographic symbols could be mapped 1:1 with words of a particular language, & therefore wouldn't fit the definition of asemic writing. However, I see them as part of a broader universe of possibles.

carefully drawn/written pictographic symbols sit still & share something with stone or earth. Illegible cursive is at the other end of the spectrum, & shares something with air or fire or electricity or water.

an emerging area which could be useful to our understanding is Mark Studies.

visual poetry was an early doorway into asemic writing for me, but it's not the only one. I consider asemic writing to be a category of visual material, subjective to the viewer's reaction to it. (The marks on the piece of paper aren't asemic; when a reader sees the marks, attempts to read words out of them & fails, that would fit my definition of asemic writing.)

the faculty of Imagination is underrated. My impression is that postmodern & poststructuralist theory is uncomfortable with imagination, & suspicious of creativity. Asemic writing can often stimulate the imagination.

is there a wind blowing the idea of asemic writing around the world at the moment? At least in English & Italian, there's more writing & thinking about it than there has been in years.

best to you all,
Tim

Jim Leftwich, September 16, 2015, comment posted to Asemic Writing: The New Post-Literate Facebook Group

Unfortunately, at least to my way of thinking, in recent years the work with the word-syllable-letter has been largely abandoned in favor of quasi-calligraphic practices and various forms of abstract art. The struggle with writing, in writing, as writing doesn't seem to be a very important part of what is happening under the umbrella of the word "asemic" today. What attracted me to the notion of asemeia circa 1997 was my experience of it as a kind of aspirational writing-against-itself. There is no such thing as asemic writing, but in struggling towards it one might find oneself doing and thinking things the experience of which would be unavailable without this specific practice. That's why it is important. As a means of producing aesthetic objects it really has no importance whatsoever.

Rosaire Appel, Four questions about asemic writing, #01

Posted by Marco Giovenale on Tuesday, May 12, 2015

1. Do you think the practice of asemic writing is something different from visual poetry? Or a part of it?

Asemic writing is a much broader category/ practice with a wider range of possible outcomes – visual poetry is confined to, well, visual poetry. Asemic writing need not have anything to do with poetry. The term poetry suggests a work with some kind of cohesive independence. Asemic writing is a tool, an implement, an instance – not a form or style – it can appear anywhere on its own or in conjunction.

[...]

Practicing asemic writing and contemplating it is a way to step outside of traditional languages in order to see first hand how traditional languages actually function.

Spencer Selby, Four questions about asemic writing, #02

Posted by Marco Giovenale on Friday, June 12, 2015

I am not against development or use of different terms, for this or any art that might be forging new territory. To be honest, I think some confusion and controversy surrounding asemic art is caused by taking the term itself too seriously. I can imagine doing the same thing Jim Leftwich has done, and devise a new term or terms (metasemic? parasemic?) for the the work called asemic that I have done. By themselves these are just labels, perhaps useful, at times even necessary, but it still must be said that no single term or phrase, for any category of art, should be taken as much more than reductive, expedient shorthand.

Nico Vassilakis, Four questions about asemic writing, #03

Posted by Marco Giovenale on Monday, June 29, 2015

the crux of asemic WRITING is illegible writing that holds no semantic meaning and that the writing is concerned with creating difficulty for the reader and their engagement with text. More importantly, it intends to distract the reader long enough to remind her, she is SEEING text. What the text, the content of the text, is saying is of no consequence. It is an alternative to seeing writing and reading seeing. This idea, for the most part, is an outcropping of visual poetry, which is an outlier of concrete poetry.

[...]

Moving away from asemic WRITING toward asemic art is inevitable, but complicates the definition, as is evidenced by facebook comment threads regarding this subject. Anything can happen, and it will.

Tim Gaze, Four questions about asemic writing, #04

Posted by Marco Giovenale on Sunday, July 12, 2015

1. Do you think the practice of asemic writing is something different from visual poetry? Or a part of it?

They're 2 separate areas which intersect some of the time. As well as humans deliberately making asemic writing ("practice"), there are many possibilities for accidentally making asemic writing (for which I wouldn't use the term "practice").

2. Asemic texts appeared often here and there over the course of the 20th century. Then, at the very beginning of the 21st, it seemed that a consistent part of artists/writers, all over the world, started focusing on it. It isn't the occasional appearance of asemics in a wider context of art, but it seems now a specific practice or current. Do you agree?

Yes, several people are making compositions which they call asemic writing, and many are familiar with each others' work.

I'm partly to blame, for promoting the word "asemic" to describe this kind of work. It has been gratifying to see how my zines grew in size, how popular asemic matters are these days on the internet, and to observe new anthologies being published. Different understandings of the word "asemic" and arguments about its meaning are encouraging signs that this is a healthy, growing community.

3. Some authors think it can be said that something like an actual asemic “movement” is rapidly (or slowly?) growing. Do you think so? Or do you think there’s simply a wide constellation of different individuals, far from being defined a movement?

Yes, I agree that there is a movement. (I would also comment that I'm sure the well-known historical art movements were much more fuzzy at the time than later histories would have us believe.) I'm partly responsible, having published 3 issues of an e-zine titled asemic movement. Carlos M Luis of Miami was probably the first person to describe it as a movement, in a letter or email to me. In my mind, the movement is not just about examples of asemic writing; it also has potential to ask us to rethink some fundamental questions such as: What is writing? and What is reading? I hope also that the implications of asemic writing can knock holes in some of the currently accepted literary theory, especially Derrida's ideas about writing.

4. Anthologies, exhibits and web pages collect very different kinds of asemic works. Some of them resemble scribbles and calligraphy, so they fit the definition of “writing”. Others do not, since they include recognizable letters and symbols, or abstract art. Do you think asemics can include these areas or not?

It depends on how you want to use the term "asemic writing". Personally, I am the most interested in newly invented symbols, but can't deny the other approaches to making wordless writing or illegible writing or writing-like images. Eventually, someone will attempt to separate these into distinct categories, and apply some sort of systematic nomenclature. James Elkins' book *The Domain of Images* gives a sense of how this might be done. Hopefully, creators will continue to confound any labels or boundaries which arise.

Jim Leftwich, Four questions about asemic writing, #05
Posted by Marco Giovenale on Monday, July 20, 2015

4. Anthologies, exhibits and web pages collect very different kinds of asemic works. Some of them resemble scribbles and calligraphy, so they fit the definition of “writing”. Others do not, since they include recognizable letters and symbols, or abstract art. Do you think asemics can include these areas or not?

In my experience, asemic writing begins with text. The text is subjected to a series of processes. Some processes are recombinative, others are subtractive, others are improvisational and associational. A text is a mutagen when fed to itself repeatedly. In my experience, the origins of asemic calligraphy are in the shapes of the printed letters. The poem had already long ago

broken the word into its syllables. We can say as a kind of historical shorthand that Marinetti broke the syllable into its letters -- and from the Italian Futurists to zaum, and on to Zurich, only 1909 to 1916 so far in this story, then out of that war and into the next, out and into Isou, and everything begins to unravel and replicate, concrete, constellations, the mimeo revolution (THE MIMEO REVOLUTION!)... to too much of everything, everywhere, all the time... the road of excess leads to the road of excess... Marinetti's parole in liberta as ornaments in our immersive environments... on billboards... on buses... on t-shirts... Text, even radical, avant-garde text, has become a weapon in the war against us, in our wars against ourselves... in the end was the word, and the word was SHIT. What to do in such a wor(l)d? Well, we have thought, some of those among us, more times than we can count, that maybe the time has come to wage war against the weapons, against the weapons being used against us... So, this is how we come to the current configurations of the concept of asemic writing... We were thinking about creating a temporary autonomous zone deep in the crevices of our minds... and then we were thinking about taking it to the streets. The practice of asemic writing was to have been a small part of our training manual.

Satu Kaikkonen, Four questions about asemic writing, #06
Posted by Marco Giovenale on Tuesday, July 28, 2015

I think that the asemic writing is a specific practice of art – and why not – I think that it is something like what our early ancestors did when they left their handmarks in the caves and as I have said before it's something that reminds me of our common base of language, it's like a memory of Baabel —from the time we all shared the same language.

[...]

I myself think that asemic art can include other elements too and we can call these different kinds of works asemic art or asemic-visual poetry. We can also make "asemics" with recognizable letters or symbols if we can not tell anymore what we are reading, if we can not understand what has been written.

Bill DiMichele, Four questions about asemic writing, #07
Posted by Marco Giovenale on Monday, August 10, 2015

Let me start by saying that I get bored really easily; I'm 63, and experience has taught me that names and titles come and go. As a teacher my impatience reached great heights as I saw a zillion different concepts/implementations come across my desk, "whole language", "big blue book", "buttmunch phonics", and numerous other teaching formats, all of them confusing to my students. But I became a better teacher when I completely ignored all the baloney and just went for it spontaneously.

[...]

I wrote earlier about my students, and here they come again. Abstraction, accident, mutant representationalism, spilled watercolor, all possible processes gone wild. Is it asemic? Kind of. Sometimes. But they don't know asemics from a lunchbox. And it's just that beautiful ignorance, that freedom, that allows them to explore. Sometime the work is so unschooled, so sublime, that I wish I had done it.

Florian Rigo, Four questions about asemic writing, #09

Posted by Marco Giovenale on Saturday, September 5, 2015

Painting and Writing are twins since the beginning of human expression when oral memory was translated into signs.

Asemic Writing is Visual Poetry and Visual Art at the same time, in the same space.

Anyway works of asemic writing have to be (also) writing.

Not only abstract art, an art making fun and science with figuration, but different ways to play with pictograms, letters, words, pictures.....drops and lines... summoning all the possible signs of human being, in the past, as memory, and in the present, as new graphic, free in imagination.

Ekaterina Samigulina, Four questions about asemic writing, #11

Posted by Marco Giovenale on Friday, December 25, 2015

Asemic writing attempts to view the text as visual art and also, more importantly, view the language as an image capable of transferring meaning without actual linguistic means involved. In other words, asemic writing is a signless artistic interpretation of the language (either the language itself or the language as handwriting or font), creating an image of that language.

[...]

There is one omnipresent but rarely articulated principle in art ethics: anything can be called something only after designating itself. It also has to specify the conditions of being eligible to be called so in the future. That's why we find it incorrect to include the numerous experiments of the 20th century in the asemic area. We can call it the first steps of asemic art, but not the asemic art itself yet. It laid the ground for the philosophical base. Obviously, asemic writing grew out of poetics and aesthetics of the Russian and European twentieth-century avant-garde.

[...]

There is a rich political potential in the asemic art. On the one hand, it can become the practice of "withdrawal" from the world of commodity exchange and into the wild; on the other hand it is a

provocative and unstable element in the system brought to order by the totalitarian linguistic discourse. We really do not want asemic writing to become a way of making money or acquiring of a social status just because being an asemic artist may be "fashionable". We do not want to see the devils of the scientific postmodernism who are quick to invent meanings where there are none turning their heads to asemic writing. The content of asemic writing is meaningless, period. It is void as a signifier that failed to make its way to its signified. But it is not meaningless as an act, as a gesture, as the hand of the original language stretched into the interior of an impersonal text, which unites the silent us in the name of a different speech.

Inna Kirillova & Gleb Kolomiets, Without Words Exhibition Catalogue, December 2015

Asemic writing can be defined as a form of calligraphy that uses unreadable characters and symbols that do not belong to any existing language.

jim leftwich, 07.09.2015,
TLPress broadside distributed at The 2015 Roanoke afterMAF Festival

|||||

Jim Leftwich, Jan 27, 1998 (to Tim Gaze):
A seme is a unit of meaning, or the smallest unit of meaning (also known as a sememe, analogous with phoneme). An asemic text, then, might be involved with units of language for reasons other than that of producing meaning.

Tim Gaze
preface to The Oxygen of Truth
The word "asemic" means "having no semantic content."
November, 1999

|||||

from Wikipedia
Asemic writing is a wordless open semantic form of writing.
The word asemic means "having no specific semantic content".

1) Asemic writing is a wordless open semantic form of writing.
When did asemic writing become wordless?
Who made the decision?
Why was it important for this kind of writing to be without words?
Does the person who made this decision know that the definition is historically inaccurate?

2) The word asemic means "having no specific semantic content".
When did the word "specific" get added to this definition?
Who made the decision to add it?
Why was it important that the semantic content not be specific?
In this context, how is asemic writing different from polysemous writing, or ambiguous writing?
Would it not be more accurate to define "asemic" as "having no semantic content"?

Jim Leftwich
07.09.2015

|||||

2016

Jim Leftwich <jimleftwich@gmail.com>

Jan 10 (10 days ago)

to Marco

something i want to mention to you, while i have it on my mind:

to my knowledge John Byrum was never particularly interested in asemic writing. i don't recall him participating in the discussion very much, if at all. his note at the bottom of a postcard he sent to me was cautionary in a kind of joking way. he certainly didn't intend for it to turn into anything at all, much something like the asemic movement. we were publishing each other in

our small press magazines (Juxta for me, Generator for him) and we were corresponding a little, and exchanging publications. his postcard was in response to a TLP that John Bennett made of some of our collaborative textual poems. actually, they were closer to what Al Ackerman called "hacks" than they were to collaborations. Bennett sent some poems and i created versions of them as if following Jasper Johns' instructions for making art (take an object, do something to it, do something else to it). my versions were radically destabilized versions of Bennett's already very open, polysemous "writerly" poems. so, Byrum's note at the bottom of his postcard was only a way of saying "if you continue with this kind of process you will eventually produce utterly unreadable poems," with the suggestion being that i was already close to doing that. the timing of the postcard was such that the word "asemic" resonated for me. i had not encountered the word before. i used it in the first chapter of Doubt, which was written in 1996:

from DOUBT
An Essay On Nothing (1996)

A ventriloquistic and narcissistic strangeness, inclusive of transcendent banality, considered as covert form herself, tombs the said salvific then weather into a joke. The least trivial once boring in legitimacy, an oral sway intends the daily book, luck before solvent content unfolds in dampened skepsis. Not only the endless mulched in spent intentions, but the ear's onus as well, where the modern poet attacks poetry's dual host. Eventually therein but never expansively made. Cessation manufactured and despised from the asemic belief in hymns and the moist crease of everyone once their lives return to the autistic drama of newness, since we are the incense of a muscular wolf, mostly soft and carrying our dreams in closure. An errant and random materiality humiliates the presence of banal salvations until we offer our judgements as a boring immanence. If one admits the toes, one can seem certain of religious hymns, not altogether in review and urge.

around the same time, Tim Gaze got in touch with me, and we started using the word to describe some of what we were doing. i don't remember exactly when Tim got in touch with me, but by the middle of 1997 i was publishing some of his work in Juxta/Electronic:

<http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/ezines/juxta/juxta22.html>

that's enough of that for now.

Marco Giovenale
Jan 11 (9 days ago)
to me

i recently got in touch with tomaso binga, alias bianca menna (widow of the critic filiberto menna, who wrote important essays on 20th century avantgardes). i'll soon talk with her about her art.

she has been performing for years with sound etc, more than with graphic works. (i admit i don't like her performances and poetry). and she also made beautiful graphic works and drawings in the 70s and later. some of them were "scritture desemantizzate" (1972-76, "desemantized writings"? "desemanticized writings"?), and they perfectly resemble asemic works. they actually *are* asemic stuff (seen with our eyes, today, of course).

for what i know, in those years experiments of this kind were not so rare in italy. i think of vincenzo accame. or magdalo mussio. about him, adriano spatola says (in "toward total poetry", 1969 and 1978, transl. by otis publishing in 2008, page 60) that his *calligraphy* "becomes or aspires to become illegible".

it's the same with franz mon (lamberto pignotti focuses on his works and on spatola's in a book, on "la poesia verbo-visiva", published in 1980, which for me is a sort of bible, sometimes a better survey than "toward total poetry").

in 1947 and later, several times, Bruno Munari invented "scritture illeggibili di popoli sconosciuti" (illegible writings from unknown people).

all of these pieces (particularly the ones from the 70s: i mentioned only a few from a thick series) of an interesting and (i think) coherent puzzle seem to point to an idea of handwritten and/or cursive letters (sometimes printed glyphs, unknown shapes) which are "illeggibili", "illegible", "desemantizzate", "desemanti[c]ized", "asemantiche", but not *meaningless* ---if "meaningless" is what absolutely does not make sense, wiping all the lights and the codes off the common ground, producing a sort of semiotic black hole swallowing the reader and the book.

if i see a good asemic page, i jump up and feel i'm just making a kind of hyper-meaningful experience. just *because* the text has no linguistic meaning, and at the same time my eye scans the page in search of it.

i think this is the way an italian reader (who in the past appreciated spatola, mussio, accame, blank, binga etc etc etc) normally looks at asemic stuff made right now. with an idea of continuity in mind.

even if there hasn't been something like "a movement" or an "asemic consciousness" (!) in the 60s & 70s & 80s. there was no need of movements or definitions: the works spoke for themselves, they were so many, a constellation, a galaxy. experiments with *illegibility* (!) were in the air.

so... i think there's either no gap or interruption of some sort of (artistic) line AND no pressing need of defining/labelling it.

and... in case of need, i may simply say: just label the work then don't mind the label !

Michael Jacobson, Jan 17, 2016

A short definition of asemic writing is: Intentionally illegible, abstract, or wordless writing.

asemic writing: recent history and ongoing research
Jim Leftwich <jimleftwich@gmail.com>

Jan 17 (4 days ago)
to JOHN
<https://angelhousepress.com/index.php?Essays>

John Bennett

Jan 18 (3 days ago)
to me
excellent assemblage of documents/fragments/ideas!! a good way to deal with that topic

john

Jim Leftwich <jimleftwich@gmail.com>
Jan 18 (3 days ago)
to John

i've been telling people involved with the subject that they should do something similar to this.
marco giovenale is already researching the history. he's gathering materials.
at least two academics are currently writing books on asemic writing. they need to know about
the history of the usage of the term.
this information needs to be readily available.
i've been working on getting some of it into circulation. folks can ignore it if they want to.

John Bennett
Jan 18 (3 days ago)

to me

heh, yes, gotta keep them academics busy - but it's good there are some finally getting around to this stuff

Jim Leftwich <jimleftwich@gmail.com>

Jan 18 (3 days ago)

to John

my self-assigned, futilitarian goal is to get them to write about it as a kind of poetry.

i say, if you follow the poem around long enough you will eventually come upon the path that leads to asemic writing. it's a dead-end road, but it's great while it lasts. every poet should spend a little of their time exploring it.

evidently there are some other ways of stumbling upon this path too, maybe certain kinds of abstract painting lead there too.

i don't know for sure about that. i just know how i got there.

John Bennett

Jan 18 (3 days ago)

to me

the basic concept and practice of it seems to have come out of writing poetry, or performing poetry on paper and/or in voice - and it goes way back in history - i've seen asemic mayan writing, perhaps done by people who were trying to imitate or illustrate mayan writing, or perhaps by people who knew how to write, but were sketching writing, or "drawing" writing, which is usually how i think of (or describe) what i do. in that sense, it IS related to drawing or painting...

Jim Leftwich <jimleftwich@gmail.com>

Jan 18 (3 days ago)

to John

have you ever written on the subject? i know you have mentioned it here and there, and i've seen threads on the IUOMA site and at the google groups asemic site, but i don't recall anything else.

this little note you just sent is really interesting.

Jim Leftwich <jimleftwich@gmail.com>

Jan 18 (3 days ago)

to John

here's something i sent to bill beamer yesterday, in response to him sending me the link to the asemic 15 exhibit in russia:

email to Bill Beamer

01.17.2016

this is an interesting new definition of asemic writing. i haven't seen it before.

"Asemic writing can be defined as a form of calligraphy that uses unreadable characters and symbols that do not belong to any existing language."

here is one kind of response:

1. a form of calligraphy

--yes, it is indeed fully capable of exploring calligraphic forms

--of course, it cannot be limited to only that area of exploration

2. uses unreadable characters and symbols

--it can use familiar characters and symbols, recontextualized

--it can use marks and spaces

--it can use distressed/damaged/destabilized letters (characters)

--it can use fragments of words, overprintings, and erasures

--and, it can cover a wide spectrum of degrees of un/readability

3. do not belong to any existing language

--again, it can explore this set of possibilities, but it cannot be required to do so

here is another kind of response:

since there is no chance that the term "asemic writing" will disappear entirely, it needs to be defined very narrowly, as narrowly as possible, so we will all know the thing when we see it. we must be able to say, "this is asemic writing, and that is not" -- not because either is actually asemic, but because we have all agreed to define the term in such a way that it can be used to refer to a very specific kind of thing. this new definition is a step in that direction.

these days i am leaning heavily towards the second kind of response.

John Bennett

Jan 18 (3 days ago)

to me

i don't recall writing anything extensive about asemics, just comments here and there. if i did, i might lean toward saying something along the lines that all writing could be considered asemic in that there is no precise "meaning" to anything written or to language in general - any atom of writing has a constantly and ever-expanding swarm of meanings and resonances, so that you could say it means everything and nothing. but such metaphysics aren't very useful -

anyway, the definition from the russian show describes a specific kind of asemic writing, as you suggest. obviously, however, the term is used for just about anything these days; it's a result of the enthusiasm for a new thing going on - people get carried away - not a bad thing. defining

things, for an artist, is not as important as doing/making things, and the doing and making always gets ahead of the defining

ah the doing and the making!

Jim Leftwich <jimleftwich@gmail.com>

Jan 18 (3 days ago)

to John

this is the main thing for me to remember:

"defining things, for an artist, is not as important as doing/making things, and the doing and making always gets ahead of the defining"

asemic writing is a rabbit-hole. i've gone down it twice.

John Bennett

Jan 18 (3 days ago)

hah, yes, down the hole, that's what happens. same thing with Vispo, Fluxus, ...

Jim Leftwich <jimleftwich@gmail.com>

Jan 19 (2 days ago)

to John

not a bad thing, not at all

g.p,

Marco Giovenale

Jan 19 (1 day ago)

to me

i started talking with giancarlo pavanello. he says the (handwritten) practice of "asemantic writing" was used in the 70s. and the people were (and he was) aware of what they were doing. so... nothing new under the sun!

asem[ant]ic writing (as applied via handwritten stuff) can be studiend under this light.

hugs again!

Jim Leftwich <jimleftwich@gmail.com>

Jan 19 (1 day ago)

to Marco

excellent!

maybe this, as one angle of approach:

asemic writing exists as potential in the traditional poem.

from the word to the syllable is the first step, as old as the poem itself.

from the syllable to the letter is an inevitable next step.

from the letter to the shapes of the letters, particularly if the poems are handwritten.

from the shapes of the letters to an improvisational calligraphy, a starting-point for explorations of the asemantic.

as we do more research i will not be surprised if we find that this has been discovered many times.

Marco Giovenale

Jan 19 (1 day ago)

to me

i think this is a right way to see the whole thing.

!!!

Tim Gaze, Coldfront, Singular Vispo :: First Encounters Part 6

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 20TH, 2016

I opened Lost & Found Times #39 (November 1997), and encountered a collection of marks by Jim Leftwich on the top portion of page 19. A more linear group of illegible marks by Jim was on the opposite page, with single verbal poems by other poets underneath each.

Seeing this work, my initial thoughts were something like: is this really poetry? Is it even writing? Although there are hints of numbers and letters, the composition destroys any sense of an orderly grid, and raises doubts about what these marks are meant to mean.

A few months after seeing this for the first time, I sampled part of it, added my own marks, and published the resulting collaboration in asemantic volume ~ 1, as well as the original rotated 90 degrees clockwise.

I get a sense of fun, creative energy from this piece. It had an effect not unlike an article in the punk fanzine Sideburns (1977), along the lines of "Here are 3 chords. Now form a band!"

Whether or not Jim intended this creation to be poetry or visual poetry, it certainly gave me pause for thought, and made me question many of my assumptions about reading, writing and poetry. Probably more than anything else, it stimulated me to begin to explore what we now call asemantic writing, as a creator, explainer and publisher.

03.07.2016